TL 5816

CNRT CONGRESS

Timor, the Region and the World

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It is impossible to describe to you how I feel about this Congress, this major step towards full independence for East Timor. It is a deeply personal and emotional experience, an outcome that only five years ago seemed beyond my wildest dreams. Then it seemed as if there was still no real end in sight for East Timor's captive state. Today I am addressing representatives of a people, who have become part of my life, and who are now at last moving to take charge of their destiny.

This destiny of the people of East Timor has become very special to me since nearly 40 years when I first came to this island. The experience, 25 years ago, when I left Dili, not long before the invasion, is one of the most poignant experiences in my life. I vividly recall those anxious faces who farewelled me, many of whom were to lose their lives in the weeks ahead. So today you can imagine my delight at seeing confident and happy faces, reflecting the exciting expectations of a people impatient to take charge of their own destiny, and to join the international community, where the leaders of East Timor seem likely to play a role well beyond the size of their country.

It is a very different scenario from what it was in November 1975, when I was here leading a mission with what was to be a forlorn task in the face of international indifference. Before looking at East Timor's

present and future international environment I would like to remind you about what it was like in the past. Not long after my return to Australia the worst outcome began to unfold - East Timor's annexation, which was achieved at a huge humanitarian cost to the people of this country.

That time of despair and human misery stands in stark contrast to today's mood in the region, and in the international community at large. Today, despite the terrible experiences of last year and occasional reminders that our new nation is without some enemies beyond East Timor's western border, expressions of hope and confidence now abound in East Timor, while the courage, determination and humility of the Timorese people has won them a special place in the hearts of millions of people in the world at large.

This new confident face of East Timor reflects to a significant degree, the radical change that has taken place in the mood of the international community. In 1975 the world was really a much less caring place. The international community was ideologically divided by the irreconcilable differences between the West and the Communist world. The main focal points were the Cold War manoevres of the major powers. There was a growing interest in human rights, but most of the rhetoric was also captive of the Cold War mentality.

The principal human rights conventions were yet to be ratified by most nations. In this environment the terrible sufferings of the East Timorese people were overshadowed by Cold War conflicts and prejudices, which

paralysed the consciences of the nations of the region surrounding East Timor, and here I must also include Australia. A single case of torture in the Communist world aroused a clamour of protest in the West, while the deaths of thousands in remote East Timor was almost ignored by governments who were looking the other way. In the region itself ASEAN countries deferred to the Suharto regime and declined to question the many distortions and lies emanating from Jakarta about what was transpiring here in East Timor.

The world of the Year 2000 is a very different place. It is more open, democratic values are taken much more seriously, and there is a demand everywhere for better respect for fundamental human rights. Human rights are no longer regarded as luxuries, to be enjoyed by the rich nations: they are now perceived as defining the nature, indeed the very fabric, of a functioning democracy, conditions essential to the health of its economy as well as to the health of its political and social life.

Let us take a look the region around us. ASEAN is now much larger and more diverse. While some of its member states have a long way to go before their people can enjoy the kind of democracy East Timor has committed itself to attain, their regimes are under increasing pressure from their people to liberalise. The nearer nations of ASEAN, especially the Philippines and Indonesia, have gone through, or are in the process of going through, the kind of democratization that the Timorese people wish to enjoy. In 1975 the Philippines was under Ferdinand Marcos,

whose authoritarian rule was akin to that of Suharto's Orde Baru. Today's Thailand is also a much more democratic and open society. Today both of those countries enjoy levels of democracy, which would not have been contemplated a quarter of a century ago.

Less than ten years ago East Timor's neo-colonial status was accepted in the region. Today, East Timor's new status is being widely welcomed in the region, with countries like Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand playing major roles in helping the East Timorese people on their way to nationhood. The Timorese people are being accepted as an independent branch of the diverse Southeast Asian family.

In Australia, too, the unhelpful political attitudes of the past have changed radically. Here I must emphasize that throughout these past 25 years the majority of the people of Australia, as distinct from their political leaders, made very clear their support for East Timor. Even those political leaders, of both left and right persuasions (or at least most of them) who were prepared, to my shame and anguish, to accept this nation's captive state and the denial of their right to self determination, have changed their views. This change made Australia's leading role last year possible, but without doubt it reflected the moral outrage at the TNI/militia assault by the massive majority of the Australian people.

In the wider international community, attitudes to the situation in East Timor also reflect the fundamental changes that have been occurring

since the eighties. The ending of the Cold War, and with it a new universal approach to human rights, in particular attitudes to the rights of small states like Estonia which had been illegally seized, gave East Timor a higher profile. The Gulf War, which erupted after Saddam Hussein's annexation of little Kuwait, also led to greater attention to East Timor. But these events would have come to nothing had it not been for Timor's friends in the international community. Here I would like to mention Portugal which for years struggled to keep the question of East Timor on the agenda of the United Nations, and before the attention of the European Union, where Lisbon's efforts were not always welcomed. In the United Nations I would like to pay special tribute to Dr Francesc Vendrell, a senior UN official, who for more than two decades encouraged those of us who sought to remind the world body of the plight of the people of East Timor. Another special leader in the international community worthy of commendation is Dr Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, one of the greatest of UN leaders, whose personal commitment has been a key factor.

However, the raising of East Timor's international profile would have come to nothing had it not been for the courageous struggle of the people of East Timor themselves, and the courage and determination of leaders like Xanana Gusmao, Bishop Carlos Bello, Jose Ramos Horta and the thousands of Timorese in the resistance who daily campaigned for their freedom at the risk of their lives. More than anything else it was the quiet determination of the people of this country which led to a steady increase in international pressure on Jakarta, and to Dr Habibie's decision to allow for last year's plebiscite.

What then of the future? I believe that for this country the outlook is an optimistic one, despite the massive task of rehabilitation, reconstruction and nation building. Whatever changes take place in Jakarta, even in a worst-case scenario a return of TNI generals to power, East Timor's national integrity is assured by new international realities. There is now an Australian-Asean commitment to the new Timor nation, a commitment that will I believe endure and embrace economic as well as security considerations. I believe that Timor Lorosae will continue to receive the kind of economic assistance necessary for its reconstruction from the United States (regardless of who wins this year's presidential elections), from Portugal and the European Union, from Japan, from the region and, of course, from Australia and New Zealand.

East Timor's past ordeal, and the extraordinary courage of its people have won it a special place in the world community. The birth of the new Timor Lorosae nation is being accompanied by an impressive commitment to democratic ideals. The challenge to the leaders of the new nation is to translate that idealism into democratic realities, and to play a creative role in strengthening international cooperation and understanding in the region, and in the world at large. It is really quite a challenge. I feel confident that they can succeed and that Timor Lorosae will emerge as an outstanding small state of the 21st century.

Finally, to have played a minor role in this historical process is certainly the greatest and proudest achievement of my career.